

COVID-19 still a worry at nursing homes; booster shots encouraged

Christina Hall

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Nearly three years since the COVID-19 pandemic began, nursing home and long-term care facilities remain a focus where federal authorities are trying to prevent more illness and death of those most vulnerable by stressing COVID-19 booster shots. But the uptake lags, with less than half of residents and less than a quarter of staff up to date on boosters.

Concern escalated as COVID-19 cases were rising in such facilities, which care for some of most frail and elderly members of society and were devastated by the virus.

In Michigan, COVID-19 cases in long-term care facilities started to rise in mid-November and may have peaked the week of Dec. 21, with cases showing a decline the week of Dec. 28, according to the most recent [state data](#).



COVID-19 cases down, but boosters are low

In the state's Jan. 3 COVID-19 response data and modeling [update](#), resident case counts decreased in skilled nursing facilities from 573 to 473 and in skilled nursing facilities staff from

559 to 505 from the prior week. The number of skilled nursing facilities reporting three more cases also decreased during that week from 63 to 57, according to the report, the most recent.

Melissa Samuel, president and CEO of the Health Care Association of Michigan, agreed, saying it appears COVID-19 cases have peaked and may be “a little bit” on the downslide.



But health leaders remain concerned about COVID-19 booster uptake, particularly among seniors and those in long-term care facilities. Last month, federal authorities announced they would be trying to accelerate efforts this winter to protect the highest-risk Americans, including those in nursing homes and long-term care facilities.

Dr. Ashish Jha, White House coronavirus response coordinator, said then that more than 90% of the COVID-19 deaths nationally were people older than 50, with deaths “really concentrated” among those age 65 and older in recent months. One in five recent COVID-19 deaths were in nursing homes and other long-term care facilities, such as assisted-living facilities, federal authorities said.

“And while we’ve seen many older Americans step up and get the updated COVID vaccine, there are still too many older Americans who have not gotten their immunity updated, who have not gotten themselves protected,” Jha said at a Dec. 15 briefing. “Under half of nursing home residents have gotten their updated COVID vaccine.”

Just 13% of Michigan nursing home staff fully boosted

As of Dec. 18, 48.5% of nursing home residents and 22.2% of nursing home staff were up to date with vaccines, according to the [data](#) from the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services.

In Michigan, Samuel said Monday, the state had good numbers of long-term care residents and staff getting the primary COVID-19 vaccination series, with about 86% of residents and 84.5% of staff getting it. But booster shots have fallen off, she said, with 42% of residents and 13% of staff boosted.

Samuel said she believes a few reasons for the booster drop-off include a lack of vaccination campaigns with boosters, compared with the strong push in 2021 for people to get initial, primary doses of vaccine. Also, she said, many people contracted the virus after being vaccinated and some people remain hesitant, despite officials saying vaccines help prevent severe illness, hospitalization and death.

COVID fatigue and questions about the value of boosters

Some long-term care residents have received four COVID-19 vaccines, two from a primary series, a first booster and the bivalent booster, Samuel said. But others question why they should get boosted and wonder what it is going to do for them, especially if they have had the other shots and/or contracted COVID-19 in the past.

Kevin Evans, executive director of Martha T. Berry Medical Care Facility in Mount Clemens, which cares for 185 residents and has 279 staff, agreed, citing fatigue about COVID-19, including booster shots.

A Kaiser Family Foundation COVID-19 Vaccine Monitor [survey](#) released last month that found that more than half of adults age 65 and older had not yet received an updated booster. The survey found that 36% of vaccinated adults age 65 and older who had not yet gotten their bivalent booster said they didn't think they needed it, with a similar share saying they didn't think the benefit of the updated booster was worth it.

Federal authorities said released a "[playbook](#)" for administrators of nursing homes and long-term care facilities to reduce serious illness and prevent hospitalizations and deaths from the virus, including making it easier to get vaccines and treatments on-site.

Facilities are to ensure every resident is educated on and offered an updated COVID-19 shot and is evaluated and offered treatment if they test positive for the virus, as well as improving air quality, according to a White House fact sheet.

Federal government takes steps to increase booster uptake

Unlike the early days of the COVID-19 vaccine rollout, nursing home staff will be able to administer these shots to residents. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services also is to work with states to launch teams and use partners with home health agencies and emergency medical technicians to deliver vaccines to residents in long-term care facilities, according to the fact sheet.

It stated that on Dec. 1, the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services added COVID-19 vaccination rates of health care staff and residents at these facilities to the list of measures it will potentially consider for certain Medicare quality payment programs.

Federal authorities also are to reach out to governors and jurisdictions, particularly where nursing home vaccination rates are low, to assist in increasing COVID-19 vaccination rates for long-term care residents and staff. Hospitals also are encouraged to vaccinate unvaccinated patients or provide up-to-date shots before discharging patients, especially if they are going to a nursing home.

The American Health Care Association/National Center for Assisted Living said that many of these strategies already are underway in long-term care facilities across the country.

Samuel said long-term care facilities know more now about infection control, air control, using HVAC systems or air purifiers and how to isolate, test and treat for the coronavirus.



'We have done so much already' as rules keep changing

She and Evans said COVID-19 and its ever-evolving variants will be a part of the long-term care sector moving forward, just like the flu. Samuel said the severity of illness and death from COVID-

19, unlike the early days of the pandemic, may be behind the facilities because of this knowledge, vaccinations and immunity from people who have contracted the virus.

Evans said he believes the additional pressure now on long-term care facilities to focus on COVID-19 is a bit disproportionate and the focus should be taking care of the whole person, not just COVID-19. He believes the virus is something that can be managed with the standard precautions in place.

“We’re required to do everything we can to make sure COVID doesn’t enter the building. We have done so much already,” adding that reporting rules have changed more than 30 times since the pandemic began.

Evans said that in the last 19 months, there have been 300 cases of COVID-19 among facility residents and staff, more than half of which were asymptomatic. There have been two COVID-19-related hospitalizations, he said, compared with 70 hospitalizations for other reasons in the last nine months and no deaths from the virus in the last 19 months.

He said an outbreak is considered “one person,” escalating testing. He said because long-term facilities are continuing to test for COVID-19, “they’ll continually find it.”

Samuel said the long-term care sector remains vulnerable not just from the current concern of a tripledemic of COVID-19, flu and respiratory syncytial virus, commonly known as RSV.

But for other reasons, too. Among them, she said, economic challenges and inflation (costs have increased 10%-15%), workforce shortages and rebuilding patient census (about 78% now, but below the 83-84% pre-pandemic level).

“It is a bit of a perfect storm here that we continue to navigate,” she said.

Contact Christina Hall: chall@freepress.com Follow her on Twitter: @challreporter.

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